

Brattleboro Reformer

AOT: BF tunnel can survive repairs

By HOWARD WEISS-TISMAN
Reformer Staff

Wednesday, February 22, 2006 - BELLOWS FALLS -- An historic rail tunnel that has been causing the state headaches should survive an upgrade, according to a report recently completed by the Vermont Agency of Transportation.

Richard Hoskins, interim rail manager, said an engineering study done on the 275-foot stone arch tunnel shows that work crews should be able to lower the rails enough without touching the 155-year old structure that runs underneath the center of the village.

Double-stacked, modern rail cars cannot make it through the Bellows Falls tunnel, creating a major choke point for north-south rail traffic. The Agency of Transportation has been seeking a solution to increase and improve rail service in Vermont.

Hoskins said an earlier report answered most of the questions about the estimated \$2 million project, but the scoping study that the agency received last week seemed to give the project the final green light.

"There were questions about whether or not longer cars would make it through without scraping the middle," Hoskins said. "The consultant verified that it looks good."

Crews will likely work 24-hour shifts while completing the work this summer.

A start date has not yet been finalized, according to Hoskins. Parson Brinckerhoff, a Boston engineering firm, is drawing up the final plan. Workers will remove the rails in the tunnel, lower the bed 5 or 6 inches, and install new steel ties that are thinner. If the engineers have done their measurements correctly, the double-stacked cars should just squeeze beneath the arch tunnel.

"It's just a matter of size and geometry," said Everett Hammond, Rockingham's public works director.

Hammond met last week with some of the engineers to take a look at the plans. The engineers were grilling Hammond on the location of utility lines in the area.

Hammond also said the work will lower Mill Street a little and town crews may assist in smoothing out the transition and paving the street after the state crews are gone.

"This is the most important rail project in New England," said Charlie Moore, regional vice president of Rail America, the company that owns the New England Central Railroad, which owns the tunnel and that section of track.

His company moves freight from a yard in Palmer, Mass., up to Montreal.

Moore said some other work needs to be done to a few bridges in the state to allow double-stacked cars and containers to move over the rails, but he called the Bellows Falls tunnel, "the main obstacle to moving more freight."

"We are extremely excited about starting that project," Moore said, adding that more traffic on the railroads means less on the highways.

Sen. Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., helped secure \$2 million for the bridge work.

Charlie Miller, a rail specialist at the Agency of Transportation, said it makes sense to use public money to upgrade the privately held property.

Miller said the Bellows Falls tunnel prevents increased business in the state.

"The state gets a percentage of that business," he said. "It is about keeping the state's rail system compatible to the national rail system. This will allow Vermont to compete with other railroads in the East. It will keep our rails healthier."

Richard Ewald, Rockingham's development director and a history buff, said he is just glad the tunnel will be spared.

The continuous arch tunnel was pieced together with hundreds of individual stones. Workers blasted through solid rock when they built it in 1851. It is on the National Register of Historic Places.

"This is good news," Ewald said about the new study. "We hoped it would go this way."